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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 002715

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL AF

SUBJECT: AFGHANISTAN CONCERNED OVER IRAN'S NUCLEAR AMBITIONS, BUT AVOIDING A STRONG PUBLIC STANCE

REF: SECSTATE 91633

Classified By: PolCouns Annie Pforzheimer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) While sharing many of the United States' concerns over Iran's nuclear ambitions, several bilateral issues with Iran are likely to limit the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) from taking a strong public stance against Iran at this time. In our September 5 briefing of Director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Office of Regional Affairs, Enayatullah Nabiil on reftel issues, he expressed his understanding of the seriousness of the issue, but emphasized that the estimated two million Afghan refugees living in Iran, water and port access issues, and the tactical involvement of Iran in supporting the Taliban are realities that cause the GIRoA to tread lightly on this matter. (End Summary)

Two Million and Counting

¶2. (C) Although he was firm in expressing Afghanistan's opposition to nuclear proliferation, Nabiil stressed the need for Afghanistan to balance between the pressure to respond to the international community on Iran's nuclear ambitions and his country's interest in keeping Iran at bay. He described Iran as a highly influential neighbor, with the capacity of exerting both positive and negative influence in Afghanistan. The presence of many Afghans living in Iran is a leading cause for the GIRoA's hesitation to openly criticize that country, explained Nabiil, who estimated that nearly two million Afghans live in Iran, half of whom are undocumented. Given the current economic crisis, the Iranian government could decide to block the stream of Afghans seeking work there. In the past, Iran has cracked down on Afghan refugees and has sought to systematically expel undocumented workers. The GIRoA is reluctant to rock the boat with Iran on other issues, for fear that reprisals will be taken out on Afghans living illegally in Iran, said the MFA official.

¶3. (C) Nabiil added that because of the deterioration of his country's relations with Pakistan, Iran has emerged as an even more important trading partner for Afghanistan. As a land-locked country, Afghanistan relies on Iran's ports. Bilateral water resources issues are another concern on which Afghanistan must engage Iran, he said.

You Don't Get to Choose Your Neighbors

¶4. (C) Speaking broadly about Afghanistan's relationship with Iran, the MFA official stated that Iranians were "very tricky but subtle people" who are always looking for opportunities to exploit situations, including its relationship with Afghanistan. While stating that Pakistan is the neighbor who poses the most immediate threat to Afghanistan, he shared his concern that Iran is actually capable of doing much more

damage in Afghanistan if they should decide to go on the offensive because Iranians are more educated and sophisticated.

¶15. (C) According to Nabi, Iran's influence in Afghanistan continues to grow in both positive and nefarious ways. While the significant financial investment that Iran has made in Afghanistan, particularly in the West, has helped spur Afghanistan's sputtering economy, the MFA official also acknowledged speculation that Iran has been covertly assisting the Taliban. He said that Iran has been providing some tactical support to the Taliban, despite the ideological divide between the Sunni Taliban and Shiite Iran. This support, he said, is given simply to wear down and rankle America, and Iran remains ideologically very distant from the Taliban.

Supplicant State

¶16. (C) Our contact expressed frustration that Afghanistan cannot do more to protest Iran's nuclear activities. With so much on the line, there is little Afghanistan can do without fear of angering her "big brother" to the west. Similarly, Iran recognizes that Afghanistan cannot abandon its strategic partnership with America and the international community, and that issues like nuclear proliferation remain key agenda items for these partners. Comment: While Afghanistan opposes Iran's nuclear ambitions, it has not yet found the voice to express its concerns other than to oppose nuclear proliferation

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in principle.
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